

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 IO-11 ISO-00 SCCT-01 CIAE-00 DODE-00

PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01

SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 AF-06 SAM-01 SAB-01 AID-05 /094 W

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R 261358Z FEB 76

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 8768

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

AMCONSUL JERUSALEM

AMEMBASSY JIDDA

AMEMBASSY LONDON

AMEMBASSY PARIS

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BEIRUT 1785

E.O. 11652: XGDS-2

TAGS: PINS, PFOR, LE, SY, PLO

SUBJ: FATAH-SA'IQA RIVALRY

REF: (A) CAIRO 2045, (B) BEIRUT 1460 (NOTAL)

SUMMARY:DESPITE EVIDENCE OF LOCALIZED TENSIONS AND RIVALRY BETWEEN ADHERENTS OF FATAH AND SA'IQA, WHICH WE HAVE NOTED FOR SOME TIME, WE CONSIDER THAT IT WOULD BE INCORRECT TO OVER-EMPHASIZE EXISTENCE OF "CRISIS" BETWEEN THEM AT PRESENT. WE SEE POTENTIAL FOR INCREASED FRICTION EITHER ACCIDENTALLY OR IN CONTEXT OF POSSIBLE STRAINS BETWEEN PLO/FATAH LEADERSHIP, ON ONE HAND, AND DAMASCUS ON THE OTHER, BUT DO NOT BELIEVE SA'IQA HAS EITHER THE MILITARY MUSCLE OR RANK AND FILE SUPPORT TO CHALLENGE FATAH PRE-EMINENCE ON ITS OWN. NEW FACTOR OF COURSE IN EQUATION (WHICH IS OF CONCERN TO 'ARAFAT) IS INCREASED SYRIAN INFLUENCE IN LEBANON AND UNCERTAIN QUANTITY REPRESENTED BY
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PLA PRESENCE. THERE IS LITTLE CONVINCING EVIDENCE SO FAR

THAT SYRIA IS ACTIVELY SEEKING TO OUST 'ARAFAT OR DISPLACE FATAH THROUGH FORCE OF ARMS, BUT 'ARAFAT AND CO. RECOGNIZED SYRIAN POTENTIALITIES AND ARE SEEKING TO EXPAND THEIR SUPPORT, BOTH AMONG OTHER PALESTINIAN ORGANIZATIONS AND FROM ARAB REGIMES TO THROW INTO BALANCE IF RELATIONSHIP WITH DAMASCUS. FOR MANY REASONS, FATAH IS LIKELY TO SEEK TO AVOID OPEN CONFRONTATION WITH SYRIA, BUT PROBABLY WILL SEARCH FOR SAFE ISSUES ON WHICH TO DEMONSTRATE ITS INDEPENDENCE OF SYRIAN CONTROL AND OPPORTUNITIES TO CUT SA'IQA DOWN TO SIZE IN LEBANESE AND PALESTINIAN CONTEXTS. END SUMMARY.

1. WE BELIEVE REFTTEL B PROVIDES BACKDROP, WHICH WE CONSIDER STILL VALID, TO CONSIDERATION OF STATE OF RELATIONS BETWEEN FATAH AND SA'IQA.

2. THERE HAVE BEEN ISOLATED INDICATIONS OF FRICTION BETWEEN THESE TWO ORGANIZATIONS WHICH PRE-DATE RECENT INCREASE IN SYRIAN (AND SA'IQA) INFLUENCE AS RESULT OF CEASEFIRE AND POLITICAL SETTLEMENT EFFORTS SPONSORED BY DAMASCUS. FOR SOME MONTHS, FOR EXAMPLE, WE HAVE BEEN RECEIVING REPORTS OF DIFFICULTIES IN THE SIDON AREA WHERE BOTH ORGANIZATIONS ARE STRONG AND FATAH SUPPORTS MUSTAPHA SAAD, WHO CLAIMS TO HAVE INHERITED MANTLE OF SIDONIAN LEADERSHIP FROM HIS FATHER. MAROUF SAAD (WHO WAS KILLED IN CLASHES LAST FEB 26). SIMILARLY, THERE ARE MORE RECENT INDICATIONS OF DIFFERENCES WITH REGARD TO LT. AHMED KHATIB, LEBANESE ARMY DESERTER AND HEAD OF THE "LEBANESE ARAB ARMY" IN THE BEKAA. FATAH IS GENERALLY SUPPORTING KHATIB'S REBELLIONS WHEREAS THE SA'IQA POSITION IS MORE AMBIVALENT IN LINE WITH SYRIAN CONCERN THAT KHATIB'S ACTIVITIES ARE A COMPLICATING FACTOR IN THE SYRIAN EFFORT TO PUT THE LEBANESE STATE, AND ITS ARMY, BACK TOGETHER IN SOME WORKABLE FASHION.

3. SA'IQA, PROBABLY WITH SYRIAN ACQUIESCENCE, HAS SOUGHT FOR SOME MONTHS PAST TO INCREASE ITS SIZE AND, ULTIMATELY, TO ACQUIRE ADDED WEIGHT WITHIN FEDAYEEN COUNCILS. AT TIMES, THEREFORE, SA'IQA RECRUITERS HAVE LAVISHLY BOUGHT UP MINOR LEBANESE GANGS, THUS ALSO BUYING PREDICTABLE PROBLEMS OF DISCIPLINE AND CENTRAL CONTROL. THERE IS SOME INDICATION

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THAT THIS WHOESALE PURCHASE ARRANGEMENT HAS BEEN JUDGED TO BE COUNTERPRODUCTIVE, ALTHOUGH SA'IQA UNQUESTIONABLY EMERGED FROM TEN MONTHS OF LEBANESE CIVIL STRIFE AND AUGMENTED ORGANIZATION, EVEN IF MANY OF THE NEW RECRUITS ARE OF QUESTIONABLE EFFECTIVENESS. MORE BASICALLY, HOWEVER, SA'IQA HAS ALWAYS HAD THE ABILITY BECAUSE OF ITS SYRIAN BACKING TO BALLOON QUICKLY WITH RANKS FILLED BY UNFROCKED REGULARS OF THE SYRIAN ARMY. WE HAVE NO RPT

NOT EVIDENCE THAT THIS PRACTICE HAS BEEN FOLLOWED BY ANY SIGNIFICANT DEGREE RECENTLY, BUT SOME DISCREET INFILTRATION CANNOT BE EXCLUDED. NEVERTHELESS, FATAH REMAINS THE LARGER AND MORE EFFECTIVE ORGANIZATION NOT ONLY IN TERMS OF TRAINED MANPOWER BUT IN TERMS OF RANK AND FILE PALESTINIAN SUPPORT.

4. SA'IQA ALONE IS NOT NOW, NOR WILL IT BE IN THE FORESEEABLE FUTURE, ABLE TO CHALLENGE FATAH'S PRE-EMINENCE POLITICALLY OR MILITARILY. HOWEVER, IT IS THE INCREASE OF SYRIAN PRESENCE AND INFLUENCE IN LEBANON--AS WELL AS THE UNKNOWN QUANTITY REPRESENTED BY SYRIAN-BASED AND SUPPORTED PALESTINE LIBERATION ARMY (PLA) UNITS--WHICH GIVES THE FATAH LEADERSHIP, INCLUDING 'ARAFAT, PAUSE AND CONCERN FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS. SA'IQA THEN IS VIEWED NOT SO MUCH AS A THREAT PER SE AS A MANIFESTATION OF THE SYRIAN SHADOW. TO THE EXTENT THAT SA'IQA IS EMPLOYED, AS IT HAS BEEN FOR EXAMPLE IN THE ATTACKS ON THE TWO BEIRUT NEWSPAPERS IN LATE JANUARY, AS THE SYRIAN "ENFORCER", SA'IQA NOT ONLY ENGAGES THE ATTENTION OF FATAH'S LEADERSHIP; IT LOSES IN PRESTIGE AND FACE AMONG BOTH PALESTINIANS AND LEBANESE WHO RESENT SYRIAN CURBS ON THEIR ACTIVITIES.

4. IN OUR JUDGMENT, IT IS PERHAPS TOO EXAGGERATED TO SPEAK AT THE MOMENT OF A FATAH-SA'IQA CRISIS. SUCH A POSSIBILITY CANNOT BE EXCLUDED IN THE FUTURE, BUT WE FORESEE ITS DEVELOPING PRIMARILY IN THE CONTEXT OF A PLO-FATAH CONFRONTATION WITH SYRIA. FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, INCLUDING FATAH'S DEPENDENCE UPON SYRIA FOR LOGISTICAL SUPPORT AND THE TRANSIT OF SUPPLIES, WE CALCULATE THAT FATAH WILL TRY TO AVOID SUCH A SHOWDOWN WHILE MANEUVERING TO INCREASE ITS SUPPORT AMONG PALESTINIANS AND FROM ABROAD.
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SUCH SUPPORT, WHICH INCLUDES CLOSER RELATIONSHIPS WITH "REJECTIONIST" ORGANIZATIONS (WHO FEAR SYRIA FOR REASONS OF THEIR OWN) AND MENDING FENCES WITH ARAB REGIMES SUCH AS CAIRO AND BAGHDAD, IS VIEWED AS A MEANS OF STRENGTHENING FATAH'S HAND IN DEALINGS WITH SYRIA SHORT OF ARMED CONFRONTATION. NO ONE CAN FORESEE CLEARLY AT THIS TIME WHAT PRICE FATAH AND THE OTHER "MODERATES" MAY BE WILLING TO PAY DOCTRINALLY TO CEMENT SUCH ALLIANCES. BUT, IF THE FATAH LEADERS ARE CALCULATING THE OBIS LOGICALLY, WE DOUBT THAT THEY REGARD SUCH MEASURES AS SUFFICIENT IN THEMSELVES TO PERMIT THEM TO STAND IN THE FACE OF THE FULL RESOURCES SYRIA CAN COMMAND IN THIS REGION.

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R 261358Z FEB 76

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

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6. ALTHOUGH THERE ARE THOSE WHO ARE UNDOUBTEDLY WHIPERING (AS WELL AS SHOUTING) IN 'ARAFAT'S EAR ABOUT SYRIAN PLANS TO REPLACE HIM WITH ZUHAYR MOHSEN (THUS FEEDING UPON APPREHENSIONS HE MAY ALREADY POSSESS), WE DO NOT FIND CLEAR INDICATIONS THAT 'ARAFAT AND CO. ARE CONVINCED DAMASCUS INTENDS TO MAKE SUCH OVERT ALTERATIONS IN THE PLO LINE-UP. IN TRUTH, MOHSEN'S PRETENSIONS TO PLO LEADERSHIP WOULD BE LUDICROUS. THEREFORE, WE BELIEVE THAT 'ARAFAT WILL INTENSIFY EFFORTS TO FORGE ALLIANCES WHICH WILL MAKE HIM WE EVEN MORE WEIGHTY AND CREDIBLE FORCE IN HIS DEALINGS WITH DAMASCUS AND WHICH CAN PROVIDE HIM WITH A LARGE DEGREE OF INDEPENDENCE IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE.

7. AT THE SAME TIME, HE WILL SEEK ON QUESTIONS OF INTEREST TO THE PALESTINAIANS TO STAKE OUT POSITIONS INDEPENDENT OF SYRIA THAT CANNOT BE CONSTRUED AS A
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CAUSE BELLI. THIS POLICY, COUPLED WITH THE REAL CONCERN ABOUT THE IMPLICATIONS OF CLOSER SYRIAN-JORDANIAN RELATIONS WHICH WE NOTED IN REPORTING AS EARLY AS LAST SEPTEMBER, PROBABLY PLAYS A ROLE IN THE INTER-ARAB SHOUTING MATCH REGARDING THE RECENT JORDANIAN DECISION TO RECONVENE PARLIAMENT. A RELIABLE JOURNALIST HAS INFORMED US OF THE RECENT COMMENTS OF AN UNIDENTIFIED MEMBER OF THE PLO EXCOMM (NEITHER 'ARAFAT NOR MOHSEN) WHO STATED THAT THE PLO IS NOT RPT NOT REALLY CONCERNED WITH THE JORDANIAN ACTION. ACCORDING TO THIS HIGH-LEVEL SOURCE, JORDAN AND SYRIA DID INDEED PASS THE WORD TO THE MEMBERS OF THE EXCOMM (INCLUDING 'ARAFAT) IN ADVANCE AND PLO EXPRESSED NO RPT NO OPPOSITION. HOWEVER, SOURCE ASSERTED THAT 'ARAFAT HAS NOT BEEN INFORMED "OFFICIALLY" AND THERFORE IS TECHNICALLY ON FIRM GROUND IN DENYING FOREKNOWLEDGE. SEEMS TO US THAT 'ARAFAT AND FATAH HAVE CHOSEN TO EXPLOIT ISSUE WITH WIDE APPEAL TO PALESTINIANS AS MEANS OF SERVING NOTICE TO DAMASCUS THAT PLO-FATAH CANNOT BE TAKEN FOR GRANTED AND CAN INDEED ELICIT OUTSIDE SUPPORT FOR ITS VIEWS VIS-A-VIS SYRIA.

8. 'ARAFAT LIKEWISE HAS RATHER GLEEFULLY PILLORIED "UN-DISCIPLINED" SA'IQA ELEMENTS FOR THHIR PARTICIPATION IN JANUARY 31 ATTACK ON BEIRUT NEWSPAPERS "AL MUHARRIR" AND "BAYRUT" AND CAN BE EXPECTED TO EMPLOY SUCH ACTIONS TO EMBARRASS AND DISCREDIT SA'IQA AS A RIVAL TO FATAH. SO GREAT WAS THE FUROR IN PALESTINIAN AND LEBANESE CIRCLES OVER THIS INCIDENT THAT MOHSEN WAS COMPELLED TO EXPRESS REGRET PUBLICLY AND TO DECLARE HIS AND SA'IQA'S SUPPORT FOR 'ARAFAT'S LEADERSHIP AND FATAH PRIMACY.

9. THE POSSIBILITIES OF ACCIDENTAL CLASHES BETWEEN FATAH AND SA'IQA CANNOT BE EXCLUDED, BUT CAN PROBABLY BE CONTAINED SO LONG AS THE PLO/FATAH RELATIONSHIP WITH SYRIA REMAINS DURABLE. MOHSEN AND OTHER SA'IQA NOTABLES MAY WELL DIFFER WITH 'ARAFAT AND CO. IN PALESTINIAN COUNCILS AND WILL CERTAINLY SUPPORT SYRIAN EFFORTS TO RESOLVE THE CRISIS IN LEBANON, BUT WE DO NOT FORESEE A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN SA'IQA INFLUENCE UNLESS BACKED BY SYRIAN POWER. FOR THE MOMENT, DAMASCUS DOES NOT APPEAR TO HAVE MADE A DECISION TO PUSH SA'IQA TO THE POINT OF DISRUPTING ITS RELATIONS WITH AND CONSIDERABLE INFLUENCE

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UPON FATAH.
LAMBRAKIS

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